

March 17, 2014

Dear Esteemed Legislatures,

I am writing in support of HB 5422, An Act Concerning Awareness of Heartworm Disease. This bill would be an important first step in ensuring that pets in Connecticut receive the medical care that they need and deserve.

I have been a practicing veterinarian in Connecticut for over 25 years, and in that time I have seen gradual changes in how pets are acquired and how people care for them. Some of those changes are laudable; for example, more and more owners are acquiring their pets from shelters and adoption agencies, giving deserving animals a second chance at having a happy life. However, there has been an unintended negative consequence of this transition towards adopting, rather than purchasing, new pets.

In the “old days,” owners would buy a dog or cat from a breeder or a pet store, and their first step would be to see their local veterinarian. At that visit, we would discuss the basics of proper pet care, including such topics as vaccinations, heartworm disease and its prevention, proper nutrition, routine dental care, neutering, house training, how to avoid behavioral problems, what diseases are prevalent in that breed, and other topics of interest to the owner. This helped to ensure that owners had a good foundation of knowledge so that they could take better care of their pets.

Today, more owners are choosing to adopt. As someone who started volunteering in her hometown animal shelter while still in high school, I think this is great! But shelters and pounds are focused on finding new homes for animals. Educating new owners about proper pet care is NOT their primary mission. Unfortunately, many people come away from the adoption experience with little or no information on preventive care. Frequently they assume that if their pet has had some vaccinations and been neutered, they have no further need to seek veterinary care until years later when the pet has become ill. As a result, we are seeing an increase in animals who receive no veterinary care at all, or who are only presented to a veterinarian when they are sick...often with diseases that could have been avoided had the owners been educated about what constitutes proper preventive medicine.

We are also seeing an increase in certain diseases, such as heartworm disease and canine parvovirus, which are more prevalent in the southern states. Some rescue groups have been bringing southern dogs here for adoption, and unwittingly bringing more cases of heartworm and parvo into Connecticut. As a result, there is an increased risk that pets will come into contact with an animal harboring such diseases. Thus the need for prevention becomes even greater.

There is also a public health component of providing heartworm preventive. The Centers for Disease Control are now recommending that all animals (dogs and cats) be given a monthly heartworm preventive to help reduce the spread on intestinal parasites that can affect people. These parasites can cause, among other things, blindness in children (400-

600 cases per year in the US). The CDC estimates that 15% of Americans are seropositive for Toxocara, the dog and cat roundworm, meaning that we actually have it in our bodies. This can be prevented by ensuring that pets are properly treated for worms.

I realize that in these difficult economic times, there may be a reluctance to impose new regulations on our already-strapped shelters. There are many resources which would help lessen the financial burden of this statute. Manufacturers of heartworm preventive typically publish free brochures on heartworm disease, prevention, and treatment. Major veterinary organizations, including the AVMA and the American Animal Hospital Association, have downloadable brochures that could be printed.

I am sometimes frustrated in my daily practice by the fact that we know more about animal care than ever before, and yet some pets today are receiving worse care than pets did 20 years ago because their owners just “don’t know what they don’t know.” I think that this bill could be an important part of reversing this unfortunate trend.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,

Lora E. Miller, DVM
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